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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the teaching approaches used in a basic composition course designed for educationally disadvantaged students. The course integrates three approaches: mastery teaching and learning; James Moffett's student-centered naturalistic curriculum; and Ken Macrorie's Third Way, which combines freedom and discipline in a writing workshop. These approaches use a variety of methods and materials especially helpful to educationally disadvantaged students. Two attached handouts provide an outline of the course and a sample hierarchy of learning skills and their attendant learning activities. (RL)

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Teaching Fundamentals of Writing: A Modest Proposal

Those of us who do not question "why?" and "whether?" we should teach composition often find ourselves floundering with the questions "how?" and "what?". These questions have become particularly crucial within the past decade as students clamor for relevance and administrators preach accountability. Moreover, the ramifications of open enrollment and the call for "students' right to their own language" have reactivated apprehensions about the "lowering of standards" in our educational institutions. Courses advertised as designed to meet the needs of culturally diversified students are generally mistrusted. In many academic circles, upholding educational standards is still predicated on a Darwinian system--education designed to serve the fittest who "survive."

Nevertheless, some efforts do appear to be serving the culturally diversified students in open enrollment colleges. My observations of and conferences with teachers of writing courses designed to serve these students at the West Lafayette and the Calumet campuses of Purdue University resulted in the development of a model of a basic composition course--a fundamental course in the essentials of good writing to meet the needs of educationally disadvantaged students, and to prepare them to succeed in their subsequent academic work. That model proposed here, is necessarily more modest than its ambitious title might suggest. It represents a synthesis of composition theory and the teachers' testing of those theories in practice. At least,

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identifying some of the principles teachers practice but do not articulate may provide some useful insights and contributions toward alternative programs.

Teachers of English 100 and GNS 20 (as the courses are designated in the catalogs of the respective campuses), even without formal knowledge of the concepts I articulate in this paper seem to be committed to a synthesis of three approaches which I fell have strong potential for the design and execution of a basic composition course. These are: 1) mastery teaching and learning, 2) Moffett's student-centered naturalistic curriculum, and 3) Macrorie's Third Way.

Mastery teaching and learning, as described by University of Chicago professor, Benjamin S. Bloom in a 1968 article, "Learning for Mastery" in Evaluation Comment is rooted in the basic assumption that under appropriate instructional conditions virtually all students can and will learn most of what they are taught. Bloom emphasizes:

> ...it is the task of instruction to find the means which will enable our students to master the subject matter under consideration. Our basic task is to determine what we mean by mastery of the subject and to search for the methods and materials which will enable the largest proportion of our students to attain such mastery.

Mastery teaching and learning also assumes that student aptitude depends on the rate, not the level, at which a student can learn. Therefore, "...it should be possible to fix the degree of learning expected of each student at some mastery performance level. Then, by attending to the time allowed and the quality of instruction ...the teacher should be able to ensure that each student attains this level."[1]

Attention to individual rates and styles of learning implies that the teacher uses a variety of materials involving all sensory modes -- sight, hearing, touch, even smell and taste-- to increase student sensitivity to his world, the world about which he will write. In addition, English 100 and GNS 20 teachers create in the classroom the atmosphere of a writer's workshop by providing peer discussion of papers. This system allows student writers immediate feedback, checks the effectiveness of their writing, and encourages much revision -- the process any professional writer undergoes in preparing manuscripts. In essence, mastery instruction includes individualized intensive writing.

The model of the writing workshop in dealing with individual rates and styles of learning is also used in two other approaches: Moffett's naturalistic curriculum and Macrorie's Third Way. Both capitalize on the student's social and psychological growth in the ordering of teaching activities. The student moves from conceptualizing and writing about himself for himself, to writing for and about others.

The majority of the research on the success of mastery learning and teaching has been done in mathematics and science-- subjects which can easily be divided into discrete learning units. It is more difficult to divide the skills of English composition into easily identifiable and discrete learning units, which then combine to generate the 'good paper.' While I acknowledge that all learning that takes place in an English classroom cannot be described <u>exclusively</u> in terms of performance that can be measured by rigid quantifying, we further do ourselves an injustice by

trivializing our course descriptions with objectives such as, "writing sentences," "recognizing topic sentences," "writing paragraphs," and the like. There is much more to communicating and to composing an essay (for example, rendering, tightening, emphasizing, providing logical flow) than the more easily labelled mechanical activities.

Teaching approaches that move "logically" (but not psychologically) from word to sentence to paragraph to the full-length essay, that emphasize the mastery of grammatical rules as prerequisite to successful writing have been found spurious, psychologically unsound, and ineffective. The segmented cognitive sequences offered in all too many composition courses seem to inhibit student growth in writing skills. Some students who succeed in writing well may learn in spite of rather than because of rules imposed prior to the actual processes of writing and composing (The stipulation "prior" indicates that the introduction of rules and conventions of good writing are misplaced in the teaching sequence; they should be considered as an inductive finish to teaching good writing, as Moffett and Macrorie among others, have insisted).

A well-conceived and executed program employing the mastery learning/teaching concept would allow each student to proceed at his own carefully guided pace in learning the essentials of good writing in an individualized intensive writing course. The goals of such a course parallel those of any intellectually respectable course -- the students will be able to write clear, coherent, and grammatically correct papers; in addition, the students will experience strong interaction of their cognitive and affective responses.

In confusing goals and methods, some composition teachers have short-sighted visions of the possibilities within an instructional situation which lead to the same goal. Particularly, by acting as if the mythical average student exists, they have failed to perceive the need for a multi-sensory approach in teaching. Therefore, the composition teacher generally insists that the student must learn only to read and react to some prescribed formula.

The problem, as James Moffett points out in Teaching the Universe of Discourse, comes from concentration on the written product rather than on how the student perceives the information he then composes into a finished product: "One failure of English teaching has been to consider only messages, or consider them before or without placing them in the whole context of the communication frame wherein the student can see the operation of all relations."[2] The communication frame to which Moffett refers involves instructional objectives and procedures which would guide the student in his psychological and experiential growth as an observer-recorder-composer. As Moffett further explains: "The primary dimension of growth seems to be a movement from the center of the self outward. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the self enlarges, assimilating the world to itself and accommodating itself to the world, as Piaget puts it...In moving outward from himself (the student) becomes more himself. The teacher's art is to move with this movement, a subtle act possible only if he shifts his gaze from the subject to the learner, for the subject is in the learner."[3] In abandonning the myth of the print-centered, subject-centered stimulus situation, and by

opening to a multi-sensory, multi-media approach, the teacher arranges the teaching-learning experiences to match the social and psychological growth of students and thus facilitates their mastery of composition skills.

The Media Preference Hierarchy (outlined in Handout #1) suggested by James D. Russell in Developing Modules of Instruction and Moffett's representation of the spectrum of discourse, both of which are based on cognitive theories of the learner's psychological development, suggest hierarchies of learning that could serve as guidelines in setting up mastery levels. The interaction of the two models as it is proposed here is based on materials and procedures that other teachers and I have used to accomplish various instructional objectives. At the time the materials were used, the teachers were not always aware that the instructional procedures fit any particular hierarchy of learning skills. However, through hypothesis, we might test the validity of/the model proposed here.

The success of courses like GNS 20 and English 100 which depend on the notion of a student-centered, multi-media curriculum based on the student's own production of language, represents a reaction to curriculums based on fixed materials. Writers like James Moffett and Ken Macrorie provide guidance for the individual teacher. Each writer perceives the failure of the traditional English curriculum and conceives a structure to revitalize it. According to Moffett:

> What a student needs most of all is how to perceive how he is using language and how he might use it. What this requires is awareness, not information. 4

Macrorie succinctly analyzes the old way and its replacement:

> In the First Way, the teacher hands out a package of information and tests to see whether students can remember its content. . .
>
> In the Second Way, the teacher provides complete freedom and no direction at all.
>
> In the Third Way, which I stumbled onto, students operate with freedom and discipline. They are given real choices and encouraged to learn the way of experts. 5

The Third Way, like the naturalistic curriculum, begins with writings that reflect the student's own feelings, memories and observations about his world. The Writing Workshop is the major emphasis, the central force, of the Third Way. The rationale of the Third Way is "to show teachers how to train students to become helpful critics of each other's writing and how to act as editors rather than correctors, leading a student through draft after draft of his writing until it becomes a work hard for the reader to put down" (emphasis mine).[6]

The student begins by practicing timed free writings--writings done freely and quickly--designed to prevent him from writing phony, pretentious language (what Macrorie calls "Engfish"), and to force him to write down what he honestly feels and sees. As the student progresses, he is encouraged to record the facts that led him to his impressions, little stories which will convey his feelings to the audience. Macrorie explains, "A good piece of writing does more than assert. It convinces by relating a body of experience. It embodies ideas or opinions in fact." [7]

As the student practices developing and articulating his point of view, seeking to convince or to move his audience, he also studies passages written by other students. The class engages in round-table discussions, pointing out passages that work and those that don't work, analyzing the student writings included in the text and

the writing of classmates. Positive criticism precedes negative: if a student cannot find a memorable passage in the writings of one of his peers, he advises, "Keep writing." Before a student submits a work for peer criticism, he devotes his first free writings to collecting, observing, limbering up.

One of the devices proposed to train observation is the "fabulous reality"-- a surprising and unique real situation, e.g., "a band-aid on a small tree"; "a pregnant woman carrying a globe in front of her up a steep sidewalk in the city." [8] Collecting and presenting fabulous realities also develops economy and directness of statement. To present the situation, the writer must clearly and effectively present the facts (not explain) so that the reader immediately perceives the surprise and uniqueness of the situation.

This series of free writings allows the student to organize fragments of his experience before his monologues in the full length essay. The writing workshop constantly involves the student in manipulating language--tightening, sharpening, playing with words, seeing relationships. In preparing the student to work with assigned topics, Macrorie re-iterates the importance of the elements of discourse in helping the student find an angle-- "a line of direction which will intersect writer, subject, and audience on the way to a point, an intersection of valuable meaning.[9] He adds:

> Good writing requires a constant shuttling between a writer's self and his subject--where do they intersect? If the subject is assigned and the writer feels no interest in it, he must turn it over and over, come at it from many angles until he finds a place where some aspect of the subject intersects with his past experience or present interest. Good writing also requires a shuttling between the writer and his audience. Are he and his reader similar in some ways? How should he talk to them? And good writing requires a shuttling between his subject and his readers. What parts of it will be new and significant to them. [10]

Though essentially concerned with organizing the learner's production of language about his personal experience, the Third Way also extends from the personal to impersonal mode of discourse. Macrorie capsulizes the basic plan:

> In the Third Way at the beginning of the semester--absolutely free writing in the writing course. But eventually work assigned, planned, focused--with freedom enough within each assignment to allow the student to find what really counts for him. But discipline enough to insure that it usually counts for the teacher. And if a student has found a subject choosing him alone, freedom to discuss it with the teacher and depart from the assignment. 11

Mutual resepct among students and between student and teacher is one of the most important components of the student-centered course. Group interaction and dialogue are essential in effecting student learning; the teacher acts as a guide or resource person. Interaction among peers provides continuous feedback for student ideas. Constant student-teacher feedback further dispels anxiety about grading and provides built-in evaluation.

The teaching of composition based on the ordering of student experience also sheds light on the subordinate role of grammar as a discipline for generating good student writing. In Teaching the Universe of Discourse Moffett reiterates his conviction that good writing depends on more than the mastery of grammatical syntax:

> There is good reason to believe that the final answer to linguistic elaboration lies beyond language, in general cognitive development, and that intellectual stimulation is far more likely to accelerate syntactic growth than grammar knowledge. 12

The student who edits and revises his papers in the attempt to communicate more effectively learns grammatical conventions inductively. A student publication of best papers (dittoed, mimeographed, or printed) or a bulletin board for the posting of the best papers has

proven a valuable impetus for good, grammatical student writing. The best papers can be chosen through peer criticism on the basis of standards set by the students themselves.

The Third Way and the naturalistic curriculum both offer the student real involvement with language. Indeed, handling language professionally may go a long way toward making the student professional, as Moffett observes:

> A student writng in all the same forms as the authors he reads can know literature from inside in a way that few students ever do today. If the student has to work with language constantly in the functional way the professional does, he will come to know it in the professional's intimate way. 13

The student-centered curriculum is not just designed to meet the needs of the educationally disadvantaged student. However, since the educationally disadvantaged students that GNS 20 and English 100 serve seem to have a more diversified academic and cultural background than that of the "mainstream population," the traditional curricula need considerable overhauling before they can successfully meet the needs of their changing clients. In addition, those who resist change on university campuses must still face up to the danger that prescribed, fixed curricula, particularly in the humanities, narrow the potential of students in the mainstream population, not just the educationally disadvantaged. Limited perspectives restrict human potential whether they are supported by the security of the suburbs or jaded by the unrest of the cities.

By synthesizing the notions of mastery teaching and learning in an individualized intensive writing approach, emphasizing methods and materials dictated by the student's own experience, courses like

GNS and English 100 seek to develop the potential of students heretofore ignored in the educational process. Handout #2 summarizes some of the essential features of the individualized intensive writing approach for the educationally disadvantaged.

Consciously or subconsciously, administrators and teachers suggest that "educationally disadvantaged" is equivalent to the inability to succeed at "real" college work; that is, traditional subject matter. It might be pointed out that students having completed GNS 20 or English 100 have proceeded to subsequent courses and, barring other personal and economic problems, have been observed to at least pass with a "C"--as have other students judged as "college material." Many have felt motivated to continue their writing beyond the demands of the required English courses. Out of the 154 students enrolled in the first English 100 class in September 1970 at the Purdue-West Lafayette campus, by May 1974, 118 were still at the university, most of them graduating seniors. The teachers of the course subsequent to GNS 20 (English 104) that I spoke with at the Purdue-Calumet campus also noted that many of the CNS students in their classes were at least as good as their average students; some were even better.

Academicians who continue to force the notion of Selective Education have missed the point of the demands of the overlooked minorities seeking a policy of open enrollment; the point being that the educational input comes in a variety of sizes, colors, interests, and needs. The modern educational experience cannot be so simply tested and categorized by selective examinations. Furthermore, our growing society cannot afford the luxury of the wasted student potential resulting from a Darwinian system of education predicated on serving the fittest who "survive."

Footnotes

[1] James H. Block, "Teachers, Teaching, and Mastery Learning," Today's Education, November-December, 1973, p. 30.

[2] James Moffett. Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 12.

[3] Ibid., p. 59.

[4] James Moffett. A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum-Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 11.

[5] Ken Macrorie, Uptaught (New York: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1970),p. 27.

[6] Ken Macrorie, Writing to be Read (New York: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1968), p. vi.

[7] Ibid., p. 38.

[8] Ibid, p. 44.

[9] Ibid., p. 100.

[10] Ibid., p. 100.

[11] Macrorie, Uptaught, p. 179.

[12] Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, p. 163.

[13] Ibid., p. 7.

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Handout #1

TEACHING FUNDAMENTALS OF WRITING: SAMPLE HIERARCHY OF MEDIA & SKILLS

(NOTE: The term, "media," as used by Russell and throughout this narrative, includes more than audio-visual material and equipment; "media" means activity, form of presentation.

GOALS: Becoming aware of the significance of ordinary details
Becoming aware of one's own powers of observation

MEDIA: Real-Life Experience: A rainy day

MODE OF DISCOURSE: Intrapersonal communication (Interior monologue)

OBJECTIVE: 1.3 Selected or Controlled Attention **

The student records the sounds, sights, and feelings he perceives and experiences while looking out of the window on a rainy day

GOALS: Becoming aware of other than self
Becoming aware of details that signal meaning

MEDIA: Physical involvement with artificial or simulated experience, e.g., role-playing

MODE OF DISCOURSE: Interpersonal communication between two people within vocal range--dialogue

OBJECTIVE: 1.2 Knowledge of Ways and Means of Dealing with Specifics*

The student identifies the mood of the "other person" in a situation (confrontation), e.g., at the registrar's office, he has recently experiences

GOAL: To select details to support a point of view

MEDIA: Actual observation of Experience: A Controversial Play or Movie

MODE OF DISCOURSE: Interpersonal communication between remote individuals or small groups with some personal knowledge of each other

OBJECTIVE: Willingness to respond**

The student agrees to attend a controversial play or movie of his choice and to report to the class at least five points of the presentation which did or did not appeal to him.

2.3 *Comprehension

The student identifies and explains in his own words which aspects of the movie or play he has seen would be useful in explaining his reaction and general opinion

MEDIA: Audio-Visual Representation of Experience: Movie, Future Shock

MODE OF DISCOURSE: Impersonal communication to a large anonymous group extended over space and time

OBJECTIVE: 4.0 Analysis*

The student identifies at least three of the assumptions Toffler makes about the effect of rapid change on society which will lead to "future shock" and explains how Toffler's bias is reflected in the movie presentation

Media:

Visual Representation of Experience Audio Representation of Experience Reading Verbal Descriptions Hearing Verbal Descriptions	Essays Minicourses Lectures Symposia

MODE OF DISCOURSE: Impersonal communication to a large anonymous group extended over space and time (The student works with language in the same way as the professional does.)

OBJECTIVES: 3.0 Application, 4.0 Analysis, 5.0 Synthesis, 6.0 Evaluation*

The student is able to judge appropriate format, tone, and voice in writing for a variety of audiences and purposes, and is able to formulate a point of view and to develop it in logical coherent papers communicating that point of view to others.

NOTE: (*) Indicates category of objectives identified in Bloom, et. al, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain.

(**) Indicates category of objectives identified in Krathwohl, Bloom, et al, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Affective Domain